



THE WOODSON FOUNDATION

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The Carpetbag Theatre

CRIC? CRAC!

**A Study Guide
For Teachers**



Storytelling From an African, Caribbean and American Perspective

When a storyteller is ready to tell the story, she says, "CRIC?" to see if the people are ready. And if they are not asleep, they say "CRAC!"

BACKGROUND

S

torytelling has always been an essential element of African culture. Until this century, most African cultures had no written tradition. Their history and cumulative wisdom were preserved through an oral tradition. Tribal griots were charged with the responsibility of learning and passing on the centuries-old stories of villages, clans, families, and great heroes. Although based in fact, through their transmission, these stories assumed an aura of ritual and myth.

When Africans were captured and transported to the New World as slaves, their cultures were disturbed but not destroyed. They took with them their customs, languages, and mores. Africans adjusting to new environments created folklore rooted in their ancestral traditions but adapted to their new lifestyles. They preserved the significance of storytelling and in the African mode, passed on history from one generation to another, through folktales.

In time, these art forms—both storytelling and the stories themselves—became part of the New World heritage, as evidenced in the familiar Uncle Remus stories of the southern United States. The Anansi stories of the Caribbean are likewise African in origin but adapted to and now deeply rooted in a tropical island landscape.



BEFORE THE TALES: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. All of the stories you will hear are of African origin. One of them is from Africa. Where is Africa? Can you locate it on a map? What do you know about Africa? What do you know about African people? African culture?
2. One of the stories you will hear is from Haiti. Where is Haiti? Can you locate it on a map? What do you know about Haiti? What do you know about Haitian people? Haitian culture?
3. One of the stories you will hear is from the southern United States. Where is that? Can you locate it on a map? Can you name some states or cities in the South? Do you think you live in the South? What do you know about Southern people? Southern culture?
4. What is a folktale? Name some folktales that you know. What do they have in common? What kinds of characters are often in folktales? What kinds of lessons do folktales teach?
5. What is a storyteller? How many of you have ever seen or heard a storyteller? What does a storyteller do? What does the audience have to do? How is listening to a storyteller different from having a story read to you?



PERFORMANCE STYLE

CRIC? CRAC! uses story theater format and audience participation to bring African folklore to life. Young audiences are thrilled by the storytellers who perform in African costume and are accompanied by African drums and music. Audiences are invited to participate in call-and-response songs in celebration of African contributions to folklore and storytelling.



THE PERFORMERS

The Carpetbag Theatre, of Knoxville, Tennessee, is one of the oldest continually active black theater companies in the Southeast. In addition to *CRIC? CRAC!* the company performs *Dark Cowgirls and Prairie Queens*, detailing the lives of six black women pioneers of the Old West, and *Red Summer*, a work that unravels the story of a 1919 race riot in Knoxville. Performers in *CRIC? CRAC!* include Linda Parris-Bailey, executive director, Linda Hill, Vida Werner, Jeff Cody, and Bert Tanner.



VOCABULARY

Africa: The continent south of Europe and east of Asia.

Ancestry: The relatives one is descended from, through one's father and mother.

Ashanti: A people of West Africa.

Call and response: An African communication pattern in which the leader, or performer, shouts out a formula statement and the listeners, or audience, respond with a similar formula statement.

Calypso: An African rhythm adopted by Caribbean people.

Caribbean: The region, especially the islands, around the Caribbean Sea, between North and South America.

Cric? Crac!: The call and response that traditionally opens a storytelling session in Haiti.

Dialect: A distinctive version of a language, spoken by the people of a particular region.

Folktale: An ancient story passed from one generation to another; in a variety of versions,

it is well known to the people of a particular national group.

Haiti: An island in the Caribbean to which many Africans were brought as slaves. A late 18th century revolt against French colonial rulers resulted in the first black republic in the New World. The people of Haiti speak a dialect called Creole that combines French with native African and Indian languages.

Hungry time: The period when all of last year's crop has been eaten and the new crop is not yet ripe enough for harvest. In traditional African society, this was a time when villagers would share so that no one would go hungry.

Mango: A pear-shaped tropical fruit that is yellowish-red and juicy.

Oral tradition: The passing on of stories from one generation to the next.

Selfish: To put your own welfare above that of everyone else.

West Indies: The islands of the Caribbean.

Yam: A West African vegetable similar to a sweet potato.

AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

The stories you heard are thousands of years old. How do you think these ancient tales have survived so they can still be told today? (Introduce the term "oral tradition"—the passing on of stories and history from one generation to the next.) What stories have your Mom and Dad told you about their families? What stories have your grandparents told you? How might these become folktales?

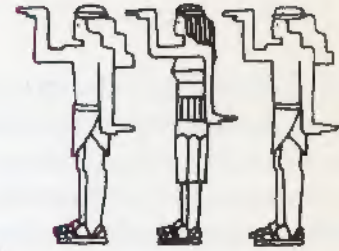
FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

Folktale Drawings

Make construction paper and crayons available to each child. Have each student choose his or her favorite folktale and illustrate the part of the tale that he or she enjoyed most. Display their drawings in a bulletin board display.

Personal Folktales

Ask your students to choose a favorite animal character from a cartoon show, book, or poem and create a folktale about him or her. Have them share their folktales with the class.



Family Folktales

Ask each student to ask an older relative to recall a folktale that he or she heard as a child. Have them write down these folktales and tell them to the class during a special storytelling session.



CRIC? CRAC! POSTTEST



1. Why are storytellers important to a people's culture?
2. Where is the continent of Africa?
3. What is call-and-response communication?
4. What does CRIC? CRAC! mean?
5. What is a dialect?
6. Why is it important for people of African descent to know about African culture?
7. Why is it important for people who are not of African descent to know about African culture?
8. What did you learn from the "How Story?"
9. Was the music an important part of the tales? Why?
10. Did the music make the tales easier to understand?

NEW BOOKS

- Aardema, Verna. *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears: A West African Tale*. New York: The Dial Press. 1975.
- Haley, Alex. *Roots*. New York: Dell. 1976.
- Harris, Joel Chandler. *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*. Harmondsworth. England: Penguin Books. 1982.
- Raffi. *The Raffi Singable Songbook: A Collection of 51 Songs from Raffi's First Three Records for Young Children*. New York: Crown. 1980.
- Sherlock, Philip M. *Anansi, the Spider Man, Jamaican Folktales*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell. 1954.
- Walker, Barbara. *The Dancing Palm Tree and Other Nigerian Folktales*. New York: Parent's Magazine. 1963.

Recordings:

Raffi: *The Corner Grocery Store and Other Singable Songs*. Troubadour Recordings. 1979.

Films:

The Dancing Lion and Mapandangare: The Great Baboon. 16mm. films. 10 min. each. Both feature Andrew Tracey telling tales from Zimbabwe to the accompaniment of the mbira, or thumb piano. There is a short introduction to African music and instruments at the beginning of each film. Both are available from Film Fair Communications, 10900 Ventura Blvd., Studio City, California 91604.

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The Carter G. Woodson Foundation is a multidisciplinary arts institution that organizes and produces the *OnStage In New Jersey Performance Series*, *Black Culture On Tour in America*, and the *Artists-In-The-Schools Program*.

The mission of the Woodson Foundation is to research, preserve, perpetuate and celebrate the creative expressions, the cultural heritage, and the historic achievements of African-Americans through performances, exhibits and educational activities.